

Reading Group Guide

James

A Novel

By Percival Everett

Introduction

From Percival Everett, the celebrated author of *Erasure* and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, comes *James*, an electrifying reimagining of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* told through the piercing perspective of the enslaved Jim.

When we meet Jim, he is an intelligent man who, despite living in bondage in the slave state of Missouri, is willing to outwit anyone in his path to provide for his wife and daughter. By day, he passes as a slave content with his status—an easy target for young Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer’s pranks—but by night, he is an autodidact determined to use his learning to improve his family’s condition. However, when Jim discovers that he will soon be sold downriver to New Orleans, he must choose between making a perilous escape or losing his family forever.

Thrust into the harrowing life of a fugitive slave, Jim hides on Jackson Island to plan his search for a place where he and his family can be free. There he meets Huck Finn, who has faked his death to escape his abusive father. Together, Jim and Huck embark on a transformative and high-stakes journey on the Mississippi River, where each bend reveals new characters, dangers, and discoveries. With the satirical force of Mark Twain and an incisive commentary on race in America that is uniquely his own, Percival Everett spins a new tale of freedom, family, and adventure for one of the most controversial characters in American literature.

The following questions and topics for discussion are designed to enrich your reading of Percival Everett’s *James*. We hope they deepen your understanding and encourage thoughtful discussion of this humorous and thrilling novel.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. *James* is a retelling of Mark Twain’s 1885 novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which is widely regarded as a classic work of American literature. Have you read *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* before? How does Everett subvert Twain’s original text? Did this reimagining change your perspective on the original novel?
2. Twain is well-known for his satirical writing. Where does Everett use humor and satire in *James*? What social and cultural conditions does the novel’s satire mock or critique?
3. Reflect on Jim’s narration. Why does he switch between vernacular and standardized English? How did this code-switching affect your reading experience?

4. Describe Huck's role in the story. How does Jim's fugitive status, as well as race, color, class, age, and education, influence the relationship between the two characters?
5. *James* depicts the brutalities of slavery, particularly the violence inflicted upon enslaved women and girls, through the stories of Sadie, Lizzie, Sammy, and Katie. What are the unique threats that these characters must navigate? How does Jim react to the gendered violence that he encounters?
6. Return to Jim's travels with the minstrel group. What does the novel say about the performance of race? How do blackface minstrelsy and racial passing complicate or undermine racial classification? Can all the characters be seen as performers of race?
7. Jim's quest for freedom parallels his quest for literacy. Discuss the key moments on his journey to writing his story. What are the texts that he studies? Who are the characters who give him the tools and encouragement to write?
8. *James* references author William Wells Browning, composer Daniel Decatur Emmett, and philosophers John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Voltaire. Consider researching these figures. How do they influence your understanding of the historical period?
9. Discuss the use of religion and superstition in the story.
10. Were you surprised by Jim's revelation in chapter one of part three? Returning to earlier passages, can you identify any moments of foreshadowing from Everett? How would you characterize Huck's reaction? Have you ever learned something shocking about your family's history?
11. *James* features an ensemble of fugitive and enslaved characters. How does Everett affirm the humanity of these characters in his writing? Was there one who was particularly memorable to you?
12. The Mississippi River is central to the landscape of the novel. What is the role of the river? How did it shape the political landscape of the region and the events of the novel?
13. Reflect on the title, *James*. What's the significance of Jim renaming himself? Why do you think Everett chose to title the novel in this way?
14. What was your reaction to the novel's ending? What do you think the future holds for James and his family?
15. After reading *James*, can you think of another character from a classic text that you would like to read as the narrator of their own story?

Recommended Readings

God's Country by Percival Everett

The Good Lord Bird by James McBride

Washington Black by Esi Edugyan

Pudd'nhead Wilson by Mark Twain

Up from Freedom by Wayne Grady

The Water Dancer by Ta-Nehisi Coates

The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead

Passing by Nella Larsen

Caucasia by Danzy Senna

Conjure Tales and Stories of the Color Line by Charles W. Chesnutt

The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man by James Weldon Johnson